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ABSTRACT

The Illinois Dissemination Research Project developed a public information brochure on Minimal Competency Testing for distribution to Illinois school boards, teachers and administrators. This method for transmitting research findings to policymaking audiences is called "targeted dissemination." It consists of: (1) translating relevant research findings into ordinary language; (2) selecting and involving a target audience; and (3) transmitting materials though exisiting groups which are linked to the target audience. This paper presents the rationale and guidelines used in the choice of audience, topic, and medium; outlines specific steps for brochure development; describes issues to be addressed in the planned brochure evaluation; and discusses potential future developments. (BS)

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TARCETED DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH-BASED INFORMATION ON EDUCATIONAL TESTING POLICY

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Abstract

A rationale is offered for using targeted dissemination to influence social policy at the local level. This rationale was used to develop a pamphlet on Minimal Competency Testing for local school boards, teachers, and administrators. Specific steps for preparing the pamphlet are oultlined, factors that contributed to sucessful attainment of the projects goals are considered, and directions for evaluating the broader impact of the dissemination pamphlet are indicated. Finally, plans for an ongoing evaluation will be noted.

The Illinois Dissemination Research Project was formed to test a relatively new method for transmitting research findings to policy-making audiences. Under the guidance of Professor Mort Weir, we developed a public information brochure on Minimal Competency Testing for distribution to school boards, teachers, and administrators in the State of Illinois. The rationale for this project followed from Weir's (1980, 1982) writings on social science and social policy, which suggested many guidelines. We shall summarize these guidelines, discuss their implementation, and conclude with an overview of evaluation and future developments. Psychologists with policy interests may find a viable role as active disseminators of research-based information to a targeted public audience. We hope the methods presented here will help psychologists to increase the use of research for social policy.

Rationale and Guidelines

First, we had to develop a working model for understanding the link between social science research and social policy decisions. Without such a working model, we could not sucessfully transmit relevant and useful information. Six core assumptions followed from an extensive review of the literature on social science and social policy:

1. Social scientists need not restrict their policy interests to federal and state government. Research information can be relevant to policy decisions made by local governement, as well as private and voluntary organizations.
2. Social scientists need not restrict their policy interests to formal public laws, decisions, and rules. The public's view of a problem, and possible solutions, is a major influence on policy (Cohen and Garet, 1975).

3. Mass media plays an important role in shaping the "common knowledge" that is used in making policy decisions (Caplan, 1979; Lindblom and Cohen, 1979). Psychologists might improve the quality of public information by actively assuming responsibility for transmitting research findings to the public (Miller, 1969; Fairweather, 1979). We can translate technical information into ordinary language, and take into account issues, decisions, and experiences that are important to our audience.
4. We do not need to restrict our information to specific recommendations and the effects of particular policy options (Caplan, 1979). We can also expand the public's awareness of alternatives, propose questions that the audience might find useful in making its own decision, change commonly held assumptions about an issue, or increase the public's general background knowledge.
5. We need not use mass media if we wish to reach a specific target group (Gregory and Stocking, 1981). We can direct our information to meet the needs of a specific target audience, and involve members of the target group in every stage of preparing materials.
6. Information can be delivered through existing organizations with established links to the target audience. There are few direct links between acamedicians and the general public. However, community groups (e.g. P.T.A., Junior League, United Way) can provide linkage, guidance, legitimacy, and other useful resources.

Thus, we decided on a strategy of "targeted dissemination", in which we would actively translate relevant research findings into ordinary language, select and involve a target audience, and transmit materials through existing groups which are linked with the target audience. Having adopted these guidelines, we proceeded to test them in practice.

Implementation

Two other projects provided useful examples of targeted dissemination. Boy's Town Center in Nebraska produces a number of pamphlets on such topics as children's friendships, runaway youth, status offenses, and adolescent physical abuse (Gregory and Stocking, 1981). The University of Illinois Agricultural Extension Service provides much information on children, youth, and family questions to the local community. Both of these services use a wide variety of methods to transmit information: brochures, booklets, videotapes, films, posters, and other targeted media. Ideally, one would first select a topic and audience before choosing a medium to transmit information (Gregory and Stocking, 1981). However, with the resources we had at our disposal, it was clear that a brochure would reach the widest audience, provide the most information, allow efficient production and distribution, and give the audience a document that could be kept for future reference. We do not argue that brochures are always the best medium. However, they are very suitable for a group with limited resources.

Having decided on a brochure as our dissemination medium, we then took the following steps to select a topic:

1. Determine the extent to which there is a need for research-based information on a proposed topic. We interviewed teachers and school administrators to assess their interest in information on Minimal Competency Testing (MCT) and existing information sources. We found great interest and a dearth of emprically-based information to meet this need.

2. Determine the extent to which reliable research results can address this need. We found that many of the teacher's concerns related to test validity, test preparation, and other areas where we could find reliable findings.

3. Assess the policy-making context. We found that dissemination to the target audience was very timely. Local school boards, teachers, and administrators are given much influence on local implementation of MCT in Illinois, so the information they receive might assist important policy decisions.

Having chosen Minimal Competency Testing as a suitable topic, we then took the

following steps to design the brochure:

1. Precisely identify the target group. Our target group included local school board members, teachers, and school administrators. We established that they shared common information needs which differed from those of the general public. Thus, they formed a distinct target group.

2. Interview members of target audience to specify information needs. Members of the target audience identified major questions, assigned priority to particular topics in MCT, and commented on ways they could use information in the brochure. Examination of teacher's journals and other materials complemented these interviews.

3. Conduct a thorough review of the social science literature bearing on these informational needs and issues. We relied on local experts and diverse skills and viewpoints within our group to reliable findings and balanced interpretations.

4. Summarize the literature in concise, jargon-free, well-founded statements. We developed a working draft of the brochure in language that our target audience would find easy to read.

5. Incorporate feedback from members of the target audience. We provided copies of the draft to members of the target audience for review and critical comments. We included teachers and administrators who had not participated in the design of the pamphlet. We also obtained comments from people with very strong opinions for and against MCT.

6. Arrange for production. We conferred with consultants in the fields of technical writing and graphics to develop the final version of the brochure. Quality in graphic design, as well as in content, was necessary to reach our intended audience.

7. Arrange for circulation. The MCT brochure will be distributed through regional education offices to secondary school teachers, administrators, and board members. A field test will be conducted with 1,500 brochures. We have the capacity to distribute 7,000 brochures at present.

We have now completed all of these steps, and will conduct an evaluation of the brochure this coming Fall. From conferring with members of our target audience, we have reason to believe we were sucessful in developing a brochure that transmitted needed information to local policymakers. The teachers and administrators we interviewed were receptive to the idea of receiving research-based information on Minimal Competency Testing. We found we could supply reliable information drawing upon major areas of psychological research (e.g. acheivement motivation, test anxiety, attributions of failiure, test

construction and validity). The final draft of the brochure met with approval from people who are involved in using MCTs. Illinois state law provides for local initiative in designing and implementing MCT programs, so our target audience may be well situated to use information from the brochure. Nevertheless, we will not have firm evidence concerning the quality and impact of the brochure until we have completed a field test and evaluation.

Evaluation

We hope to draw lessons from the field test which apply not only to the MCT brochure, but also to future dissemination projects on other topics. Thus, the evaluation will address the following issues.

Benefits of Dissemination. We assume that dissemination of research-based information will benefit the public and increase the value that the public places on social science research. However, as Gregory and Stocking (1981) note, these claims have never been established. While we cannot provide a definitive assessment of the value of dissemination, much of the data we will collect will be relevant to this issue. We will examine the impact of the brochure on beliefs, opinions, and practices. We will also ask the audience questions about the utility of specific topics we covered in the brochure, as well as overall clarity and absence of bias. Thus, we will assess whether the brochure made a constructive contribution to educational practice and was valued by recipients.

Impact of Media on "Common Knowledge". We have assumed that targeted dissemination can affect the public's "view of a social problem, and it's possible solution" (Cohen and Garet, 1975). Information that changes the way people think about a problem might even have more impact on policy than information that recommends a particular course of action (Caplan, 1979). Although the pamphlet adopts a generally neutral tone throughout, there are

some sections that recommend particular educational practices (e.g. test preparation). Other sections do not recommend particular practices, but may change public attitudes and beliefs by providing general information about alternative types of MCT and questions of test validity. If Caplan's (1979) views apply to our audience, they should show considerable change in attitude and beliefs, and should indicate that sections that did not recommend particular educational practices were still very useful. If particular practices are adopted without attitude change, and the audience does not welcome non-prescriptive information, then we may have to reassess Caplan's (1979) points.

Quality Control. We consulted with members of the target audience at several points to check that our brochure was clear, relevant, and unbiased. We will assess overall clarity and bias, as well as the usefulness of particular sections. We will use this data to assess the adequacy of the process we used to develop the MCT brochure, and to indicate areas where modifications in this process may be needed.

District Characteristics and Impact. The school districts in our sample are generally rural. However, they differ in degree to which they have developed an MCT program, or in the type of MCT program they have adopted. Thus, we can examine the effect of the brochure on the development of MCT programs, and the use of information from the brochure in districts with different types of MCT. This information may be useful for future projects where the development and implementation of policy varies from one local district to another.

Utilization. The brochure may have consequences on educational practice we cannot forsee. Thus, we will ask for specific, concrete examples where teachers have used information from the brochure.

Our experience with the dissemination project suggests many directions for future development. First, dissemination can be an ongoing activity for psychologists with social policy interests. The project gave us a new and viable role. We were able to draw upon the resources of the university to address an identified need for information at the local level. While the evaluation may indicate areas where improvement is needed, the basic methods we described are at least pratical and rewarding.

Second, distributing public information need not be a "high technology" affair involving great expenses and sophisticated equipment. Our project drew upon time and collaboration more than money. It is possible to start a dissemination project on a trial basis without risking major investments in technical equipment.

Third, targeted dissemination can increase links between the university and the community. While mass media can reach a wider audience, targeted messages can be tailored for the needs of a particular group, and delivered through an organization that links the memebers of the target group. In the long run, targeted messages may form closer bonds between the university and community, as has been the case with Agricultural Extension Services.

Fourth, targeted media may alleviate some professional concerns about popular dissemination of social science. We were writing for a known audience with a clear idea of who would use the information. We had complete control over the content of the brochure. We had ample time to verify our facts. In short, we had many safeguards against misrepresentation of our information.

Finally, we need to build a body of research on targeted dissemination of information on children, youths, and families. There has been much research evaluating tactics to persuade people to adopt a social innovation (Fairweather, 1979). However, we are trying to communicate new information, rather than convincing people to adopt new techniques. We are also dealing with a new and difficult area for dissemination: social policy affecting children, youths, and families. We can easily find ourselves blinded by myths and trapped by unintended consequences of our interventions if we do not gather data. We will be taking our first step in this direction by examining audience evaluation of the brochure, changes in attitudes and behaviors, and archival records of local policies.

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